



# CORONERS INQUESTS



## *Hankerton*

### **Newly Born Baby**

#### **Policeman's Discovery at Coberley**

PC Williams, of Charlton Kings, visiting Slack's barn, Coberley, at 1 am on Friday, found a girl named Ellen Sparrow, about 18 years of age, who for the past 18 months has been in service at Glenhall Farm, Ham, Charlton Kings, lying upon some straw. He also discovered, by the aid of his bull's-eye lamp, a quantity of blood on the floor of the barn, about which he questioned Sparrow, who made various statements. The constable took her back to her place of service, which she had suddenly left on the previous Wednesday, she having been seen wandering about the village the same night. As during Friday morning she was unwell, a medical man was sent for, who informed the police that the girl had recently been confined. PS Day and PC Williams consequently went to Slack's barn, where, underneath some straw, they discovered the body of a newly-born female child, which they conveyed to the Charlton Kings Police-station. It is stated that there was every appearance of the child having had a separate existence, and that it died from inattention at birth.

#### **The Inquest**

An inquest was held with regard to the circumstances narrated above in Cheltenham Police-station on Monday afternoon by Mr J Waghorne, divisional coroner.

The Coroner, having given a synopsis of the evidence to be adduced, added that Dr Meyricke-Jones had made a post-mortem examination of the body. In his (the doctor's) opinion the cause of death was want of attention at birth, chiefly the neglect to tie the cord. There was a slight indentation on the head, but the doctor was of opinion that that had been caused after death. It would therefore seem that there was no ground for suggesting that this was a case of willful murder or anything of that kind. That was perhaps fortunate for the girl; for if the facts adduced were borne out in evidence the duty of the jury would simply be to return a verdict of death from want of attention at birth. Whether any proceedings should be taken for concealment of birth was a question which would not concern them.

Mrs Minnie Florence Mitchell, of Charlton Kings, wife of Mr Albert Dyer Mitchell, said the girl Sparrow had been in her employ as a general servant for about ten months, and was 18 years of age. On Thursday last everything went off as usual, and the girl went to bed at 9.30 that night. The following morning Sparrow was, however, missing and witness found a note as follows: - "Send all my belongings home to mother. Shall be there a day or two after. --- Ellen." This aroused witness's suspicion, as she had heard rumours about the girl's condition, which, however, she thought were unfounded. She at once communicated by telegram with the girl's parents, who reside at

Malmesbury. She received a telegram from the girl's parents in the evening, and she took it to PS Day.

While at the Police-station PS Day sent a constable to look for the girl, and he returned shortly afterwards, and said he had spoken to her, and told her she was wanted at the police-station. She thereupon ran away, and apparently wandered in the woods all night. Witness heard nothing more of the girl until shortly after 3 am on Friday, when PC Williams said he had found her wandering about Coberley. Witness admitted the girl, not knowing that anything had happened. Had she known of the girl's condition, she would not have received her back. She told the girl that rumours had reached her with regard to her condition; but the latter replied "It is a strange thing that people should talk of me in that way. I went away because my mind had become unbalanced through worry about my mother's illness. I had intended to go home to nurse her." In this way the girl smoothed things over, and she saw her up to bed, taking the precaution to turn the key on her owing to the peculiarity of the circumstances.

The next morning witness went up to the girls room about 8 o'clock, taking her some breakfast. She expected to find her in bed, as the girl had told her that she had not slept for two nights. The previous night had also been terribly wet, though curiously enough, as she thought, the girl's clothing was not wet. The girl was, however, up, and packing her box preparatory to going home, as it was arranged that she should on that day, being the day on which the notice she had herself given expired. She asked to be allowed to go on with the household work, but this witness refused to permit. With that morning's post witness received a letter from the girl's mother, which made her more suspicious, and she insisted on searching her box, but found nothing to throw any light on the circumstances, either by way of correspondence or otherwise. At the girl's request she gave her some sewing to do whilst she was waiting to go to the station; but just before the girl was due to start she seemed to have a terrible spasm of pain, which distorted her face, followed by a shivering fit. Witness then said to her "If you do not tell me what has happened, I will send for a doctor and have you examined." She replied, "Whilst wandering about last night, I was taken very ill on the road to Cirencester, and went into a barn, where I was taken very ill. I do not know what happened afterwards until I came to, and saw the policeman, who found me in a half-dazed condition." Witness then sent for Dr Meyrick-Jones.

Some time before she went away had you noticed anything? --- Only a month ago I spoke to her about her appearance, and she most emphatically denied that there was anything of the kind the matter. Next day she gave her notice to leave.

Witness added that the girl had assured her only that morning that up to within a month ago everything was as it should be. Such cases sometimes occurred, according to the doctor.

The Coroner. I am sure we are much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken in the matter. We are all sorry you have had this inconvenience, but you have acted a charitable part by the girl.

The Jury. Hear, Hear.

PC Gilbert Williams, of Charlton Kings, stated that on Thursday morning, October 18<sup>th</sup>, he received instructions to make inquiries for Ellen Sparrow, who was reported to be missing. At 9 o'clock the same evening a man came in to make a complaint, and witness ascertained from him that a young girl had been seen in a ploughed field on the Vineyards Farm. The girl, who was going in the direction of Charlton Hill, asked a man named Chamberlain the way to Elkstone.

On the following day, on visiting a barn at Coberley he found the missing girl, who was awake, and was lying on her left side on some straw. Witness shone his lantern on to the girl, it then being dark, whereupon she commenced to cry. When asked where she intended going, she said "I am going home to mother." On asking her how it was she did not go before, she replied "I was afraid to go anywhere, for I knew the police were making inquiries for me." Witness asked her to return with him, and she asked where he was going to take her. Witness replied that she could please herself whether

she went to the Police-station or to Mrs Mitchell's. Sparrow said she could not go back to Mrs Mitchell's, adding "What would they say to me?" Witness told her he had seen Mrs Mitchell, and that she was willing to take her back and see her safely home. She added "Do not tell them where you found me." He replied that he should, and she thereupon asked witness to tell Mrs Mitchell when she was gone away.

The girl put her hat on, and picked up a brown paper parcel. When asked why she ran away she replied "I wanted to go home to mother, and was going to walk it." As he was going to leave the barn his lamp flashed on some straw, and he then saw some blood about three yards from where the girl had been lying. When asked to account for the blood being there she made no reply at first, but on being pressed said "That's where I cut my leg on coming in last night." Witness asked if her leg was still bleeding, but received a reply in the negative. He remarked that it seemed funny that her leg should bleed like that, and enquired if she was telling the truth. She then replied "It is not the truth." He asked her if she had attempted to take her life, and she said "No." Witness said he wanted to know the rights of it, and Sparrow replied that it was an ordinary complaint, and that she did not like to say. He then took the girl home.

By the Coroner: He did not suspect that the girl had been delivered of a child, or else he should not have brought her from the barn.

Mrs Mitchell here mentioned that the girl was by no means destitute, as she was receiving £13 a year wages, and could have afforded to take a train home.

The Coroner told Mrs Mitchell that the jury quite understood that.

Continuing, witness said he visited the barn in company with PS Day about 1 pm that day, and made a search under the straw. Near the spot where he had seen the girl they found the dead body of a female infant lightly covered with straw, which was a little bloodstained. The body was lying face downwards, with its head a little on one side. Witness took it to the Charlton Kings Police-station, where Dr Meyrick-Jones examined it.

PS Day corroborated, and, in answer to the coroner, said the straw must have been deliberately placed over the body. It was a foot deep.

Dr Hugh Meyrick-Jones, Charlton Kings, said he saw the girl at 11.20 on Friday morning, and formed the conclusion that she had recently been delivered of a child. The girl then admitted to him that such was the case, and that the birth had taken place in the barn, but that she remembered very little about it, as she had fainted.

Later he saw the police, and made a post-mortem of the body, which was that of a fully-developed female child well nourished, and without deformity. The skull was fractured, but otherwise there were no marks of violence. The fracture was, he was satisfied, done after death. The child had had a separate existence; but the cord had been roughly torn asunder, with the result that the infant had bled to death. There was very little blood in the body. The cause of death was haemorrhage, due to the cord not having been tied; and the child could not have lived more than a few minutes.

The girl may have fainted? --- Very likely; she would not have known what was occurring, and could have done nothing.

The Coroner: Yes; she was only 18, and scarcely knew what was happening.

In answer to further questions, the witness said the child had not been smothered by the straw.

The Coroner said the evidence did not point to willful negligence on the part of the mother. When she came to, she hid the body, and, as was natural under the circumstances, denied as long as she could that anything of the kind had taken place.

The jury returned a verdict of death through want of attention at birth.

The Coroner: That is as far as you can go.

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OPC Note --- Ellen Sparrow was a native of Hankerton. She went on to marry, had two children and lived into her eighties.